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ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of women as portrayed in the mass media, focusing on the depiction of women in the traditionally passive role as compared with men in the traditionally aggressive role. The analysis of media coverage was highlighted by the examination of women and men in magazines, billboards, television, and newspapers between January 1986 and March 1987, in an effort to explore their influence in shaping sex role stereotyping. Particular emphasis was placed on the coverage of women's and men's athletic events. Findings indicated that the media reinforces the myth of women's passivity and place in society, and it is suggested that to bring about societal attitude changes, the media must present women in more non-traditional and non-stereotypical ways. (JD)

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The Aggressive Male versus the Passive Female

An Analysis of Differentials in Role Portrayal

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The Aggressive Male versus the Passive Female:
An Analysis of Differentials in Role Portrayal

According to Larson (1964) the mass media is a system by which " an individual can reach a large number of diverse people, quickly and efficiently" (p. 353), " thereby narrowing physical, temporal, and social distances" (Loy & McKenyon, 1978, p.161). For the purpose of this paper, mass media will be referred to as television, newspapers, magazines, and billboards.

Mass media is a product of cultural differentiation. As a social institution it exists to, " convey content with common appeal" (Greendorfer, 1980, p.341). In the average household the statistics for media use are impressive to say the least (Butler & Paisley, 1980). The average adult watches six hours of television per day in the winter and four hours per day in the summer. Newspapers, magazines and radio occupy another one hour per day. Butler and Paisley (1980) state that, " in real terms, averaged out and compared with other activities media encompasses more of an average American's waking hour than any other entity" (p. 51). Because of the pervasive nature of this institution, the potential for change is enormous,

though it is seldom used to it's maximum effect as a change agent.

The mass media sets agendas that we all follow and subtly reinforces the notion of sex stereotypes (Greendorfer, 1980). Concentration by the media has centered around these typical stereotypes and the message that emerges from the literature that has been conducted on women in the media studies is " that women's topics are low on the totem pole" (Luebke, 1985, p.329).

Purpose

The purpose of this investigation was to examine the role of women as portrayed in the media. The investigation focused on the portrayal of the woman in the traditionally passive role as compared with the depiction of the male in the traditionally aggressive role. The analysis of media coverage was highlighted by the examination of women and men in magazines, billboards, television, and newspapers during the period between January, 1986 and March, 1987, in an effort to explore their influence in shaping sex role stereotyping.

Women in the Media

In 1980 Paisley and Butler developed a consciousness scale to categorize five levels of media

consciousness with regards to women. These categorizations provide the focal point for this paper. They are:

1. Level 1 'Put Her Down'

   In this level, Paisley and Butler describe the blatant use of women as sex objects. Examples of such, can be seen in Playboy, Penthouse, etc. Even in general magazines, women are shown as decorative.

2. Level 2 'Keep Her in Her Place'

   This level basically deals with women in the home. It acknowledges the traditional view of women as homemakers, wives, mothers, secretaries, teachers, etc. Women are more often than not shown in the home performing " housewifely" tasks. Women are rarely seen in the media buying cars or making major family purchases. Children's television in particular reiterates the sexist stereotypes by showing cartoons and films depicting women as mothers and fathers as workers. Magazines, according to Paisley and Butler (1980) are primers of Level 2 images. They push a highly idealized image of the homemaker's role. Teen magazines tell girls that the homemaker's role is exciting and fulfilling, full of vigor and multifaceted.

3. Level 3 'Give Her Two Places'

   This is where the woman has a career and manages the home. Although this is a slightly more progressive image of the woman in that she wants to work, she is still viewed as being responsible for the home.

4. Level 4 'She is Equal'

   Advertisers are beginning to realize the economic potential of the new women's role outside the home.

5. Level 5 'She and He are Non-Stereotypical'

   This incorporates the idea that women should be shown as individuals in a non-stereotypical way. Men are shown performing traditionally opposite roles.

Magazines and Billboards.

Research in sex-role stereotyping in magazines has been studied more comprehensively than any other aspect of the media (Wagner & Banos, 1973; Courtney & Lockeretz, 1970; McGinley, 1973; Fox, 1976). These studies indicate that there is a differentiation in role portrayal with women's roles primarily centered in the affective domain and men's in the cognitive domain. Application of the consciousness scale to 447 advertisements randomly chosen from Ms, Newsweek, and

Playboy by Pingree, Hawkins, and Butler (1973-1974) identified that:

1. 27% of all advertisements were Level 1
2. 48% of all advertisements were Level 2
3. 4% of all advertisements were Level 3
4. 19% of all advertisements were Level 4
5. 2% of all advertisements were Level 5
6. 54% of all advertisements in Playboy showed females at Level 1
7. 55% of advertisements in Time and 60% in Newsweek showed females at Level 3
8. 40% of advertisements in Ms showed females at Level 5, but another 40% showed females at Level 2.

A similar content analysis of advertisements from Sports Illustrated, Redbook, Ms, Playboy, Muscle and Fitness, Women's Sports, Cosmopolitan, Runner's World, and 17 was conducted from January 1986- March 1987. The results of the study correlated with those of Pingree, Hawkins, and Butler (1973-1974). It was found that 80% of the advertisements in these magazines portrayed women at Levels 1, 2, and 4 on the consciousness scale with the most blatant use of women as sex objects in Playboy, Muscle and Fitness, and

Sports Illustrated. A previous content analysis of 1250 covers of Sports Illustrated conducted by Boutelier and San Giovanni (1983) dramatically illustrates both the symbolic annihilation and trivialization of women in sport. Women appeared on only 115 of the 1250 covers and only 55 of these were women athletes. Thus sportswomen accounted for less than 5% of the covers.

Billboards are an important media outlet. They are seen by millions and affect individual's perception of sex-role stereotypes (Boutelier & San Giovanni, 1980). Billboards from the Dallas Metroplex area were studied during the period from January 1986 - March, 1987. The billboards revealed that sex-role stereotyping was prevalent. One billboard in particular, advertising a ski resort, depicted a woman lying lengthwise on the billboard with men skiing across her chest. Magazines and billboards have an intense effect on the perpetuation of the passive feminine image. As the previous examples indicate, advertising in magazines and on billboards reinforces a man's concept of a woman's role and encourages women to accept this role also.

Television.

According to Paisley and Butler (1980), most analyses of women in the media studies has centered on the coverage given to them by television. Television has been described as the most pervasive of all media outlets. It is estimated that pre-school children watch 24 hours per week of television and that this increases steadily up to adulthood (Butler & Paisley, 1980). Television commercials and programs are noticeably sexist in their role portrayal and although advertisers are becoming more aware of the changing role of women in society, it is still predominantly the passive female that appears on our screens.

Fifty commercials from midday, prime time and during weekend sporting events were analyzed by the authors. It was found that these commercials portrayed the image of the passive woman and the aggressive man in all aspects of social life.

Women in Sport in the Media

Sports coverage devoted to women is described by Boutelier and San Giovanni (1980) as being largely stereotypic. The appearance of women in various media is relatively sparse. Where women do appear they are, more often than not, depicted in stereotypical roles.

Television.

Television is the most popular of all media forms. Boutelier and San Giovanni (1983) suggest that with few exceptions women's sports are rarely seen on television. Dyer (1982) comments that major sports coverage concentrates on male sports: football, baseball, and boxing. Individual sports played by both sexes are often presented as men's sports and men's tournaments more extensively covered. In addition, men's sports are more likely to be shown during prime time viewing and are covered more extensively than women's events.

An example of this can be seen in the coverage of the 1987 NCAA Women's and Men's Basketball Championships. The women's semi-final games were televised on ESPN whereas the men's semi-final games were shown on a major network (CBS). The women's championship game was televised on a major network, however it was shown on Saturday at noon. The men's championship game, on the other hand, was televised on a major network during prime time evening viewing and against the Academy Awards. The economic potential of men's sports is greater, in terms of sponsorship, therefore scheduling of men's sporting events at prime time viewing is likely to generate more advertising

revenue.

In evaluating the commercials shown during the 1987 NCAA Basketball Semi-finals, the following criteria were utilized: If women were depicted on Levels 1 and 2 of Paisley and Butler's (1980) consciousness scale or not shown at all, then those advertisements were classified as being geared towards males. If women were depicted on Levels 4 and 5 of the consciousness scale, then those advertisements were classified as being geared towards women. Finally, where women were depicted on Level 3 or on Level 4 with men, then these advertisements were considered geared towards a general audience. Analysis of the commercials revealed the following:

1. Of the 136 total advertisements in both the men's and women's semi-final games, 107 or 79% were found to be geared towards men, 0% towards women, and 29 or 21% towards a general audience.
2. In the men's semi-final games, of the 77 total advertisements, 60 or 78% were judged to be geared towards men, 0% towards women, and 17 or 22% towards a general audience.
3. In the women's semi-final games, of the 59 total advertisements 47 or 80% were geared towards men, 0% towards women, and 12 or 20% were judged to be

geared towards a general audience.

This suggests that television producers and sponsors consider that the large majority of viewers interested in basketball will be males.

It is noticeable that male commentators are primarily utilized to commentate women's sports and where women commentators are included, it is usually to give secondary feedback or to enhance points previously made by the male commentator. Coverage of women's events invariably centers around their ability to maintain a family life as opposed to focusing on their merits as elite athletes.

The following illustrations taken from the 1987 NCAA Men's and Women's Basketball Finals Tournament serve to highlight these points. During the men's semi-final games, all four commentators were male. Of the three commentators for the women's semi-final, one was a female. During the championship games for the men and women, there were noticeable differentials in role portrayal. Examples of these were:

1. There was a difference in the size of the crowd and thus the extent of the vocal encouragement. There were 60,000 spectators at the men's game and 16,000 spectators at the women's game.
2. Adjectives by the commentators to describe the

players were: He was the best freshman in the country and she was the best little center in women's basketball.

3. Women tended to be called mainly by their first name or first name plus surname, whereas the men were referred to by their surname.

4. In the women's game, an immediate reference was made by the commentators to the injuries which had been sustained by the women.

5. A comment was made initially in the women's game to set the names and numbers of the players with the assumption being made that the women were not recognizable and the men were recognizable by the viewing public.

6. More technical information was offered in the men's game than in the women's game.

7. There was more of an emphasis placed on the cohesive nature of the men's team (as they were more often called by their nicknames) whereas the women's coverage was far more individualized.

Analysis of the marathon section of the 1986 Ironman Triathlon revealed that men were covered 50% more than the women in the race. Adjectives used by the male commentators to describe the male competitors were generally positive, complimentary, and powerful.

However the commentary used to describe the female athletes centered around the pain they were experiencing and the difficulty of the race. Differentials in role portrayal can be found in both the 1985 and 1986 marathon sections of the Ironman Triathlon. The following observations were made:

1. The adjectives used to describe men and women: He was strong, aggressive, and unstoppable, whereas she was running within a world of pain.
2. Slow motion finishes for the men highlighted the importance of their completion of the event. This was absent for the women.
3. Women were portrayed in a far more emotional capacity than the men.

These analyses of women in sport suggest that media coverage is limited for women in sporting events and competitions. When both males and females are covered in the same sporting event, women are most often relegated to a secondary position. When women engage in the same sports as men, such as in tennis, basketball, or gymnastics, the coverage takes a completely different focus, with the women's coverage often being less technical and less informative. In addition, there is quite often less total coverage for the women's events and less importance placed on the

event itself.

Newspapers.

It is evident that the coverage of women's sporting events in newspapers has extended since the early 1970's. However, Boutelier and San Giovanni (1983) suggest that while this is so, the coverage of women's sports has grown in smaller newspapers rather than in the larger tabloids. Where women's sports are covered the placement and style of the article still reflect their inferior status. An example of this can be seen in the coverage of the NCAA Basketball Championships in March, 1986. The women's championship game was played on March 29th and was won by the University of Texas. Coverage of this event in the March 31st edition of the Dallas Times Herald was relegated to page nine and limited to three columns of type set and two black and white pictures. The same edition of this newspaper carried front page coverage of the upcoming men's final in which no Texas team was featured.

This example of limited coverage of a major women's sporting event suggests to the public that the status of women's sports is inferior to that of men's and assumes the notion that people will be more interested in reading about men's sports. This message

effectively reinforces negative attitudes of sexism.

Summary

The media sets agendas that we all follow; how we look, act, and feel. Advertising exploits and reinforces the myth of the woman's place. This exploitation begins early in the socialization process and effectively perpetuates the myth of the passive female. It is likely that the stereotypical view of women in the media will not change unless women assume more responsibility for the technical sides of media production. Women must also gain more responsibility and respect in society before they can hope to eliminate sexism in the media.

What is needed then is a new view of society that would encompass a change in the way that women athletes are viewed in sport. These changes would necessarily have to include the following:

1. Equality of exposure by the media of women athletes and participants.
2. A more serious and less biased approach to commentating by men involved in reporting women's sports.
3. Equality of sponsorship for women's athletics.

The stereotypical view of the aggressive male versus the passive female is deeply rooted in our

consciousness. For attitudinal changes to occur, there is a need for a dramatic change in society. The process of change has to start at an individual level in order to be a lasting one and it is recognized that this will be a painstaking process. While equality cannot be achieved overnight, the media must take more responsibility for achieving this goal by presenting women in non-traditional and non-stereotypical ways.

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